

Agami Heron

Agamia agami



The Agami Heron *Agamia agami*—also known as Chestnut-bellied Heron—is (in full pre-breeding finery) arguably the most beautiful of all New World herons. It is a little-known inhabitant of tropical lowlands from south-east Mexico south on the Pacific slope to Ecuador and on the Atlantic slope to northern Bolivia and Amazonian Brazil¹. The species is generally encountered rarely in most if not all of its range but, like many Neotropical species, this perceived rarity appears largely an artefact of its reclusive nature and relatively inaccessible habitat. In some areas at least, Agamis breed in colonies of up to 12–15 pairs, which may be associated with aggregations of other nesting waterbirds^{5,8}. The species favours shady forest streams and swamps, mangroves and wooded lagoons^{3,4,6,8} where a bird's dark tones and frequently motionless posture render it easily overlooked. Agami Heron rarely, if ever, appears in the open and tend to freeze or creep away stealthily into tangled vegetation in response

to a noisy approach, such as people talking loudly or a motor boat. If startled, the species usually flies up into trees where they can be very difficult to find. The birds tend to be mostly silent, occasionally uttering low, slightly rolled growls (pers. obs.) and, in alarm, a low *guk*⁸.

From Belize, Russell⁷ reported five specimens, the most recent dated 1955; however, field parties of which Russell was a member failed to record this species in the country. Consequently he considered it “a local and rare resident”, although earlier workers had reported Agami Heron as locally common⁷. At Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Belize, local naturalist and boatman Sam Tillet has, in recent years, found Agami Heron to be seasonally quite common at a few places in the reserve. Like many species, the birds tend to be encountered most often towards the end of the dry season when reduced areas of water concentrate wading birds along a few permanent creeks and lagoons.

Even then, finding the birds requires a well-handled boat and sharp eyes. The herons favour shady tangles of branches overhanging the water, and in times of peak abundance there can be one bird every c.100 m in suitable habitat, with up to 10 or more birds in a fairly small area. Usually they are solitary, although at times two will occur together in a large area of overhanging vegetation. The birds feed by standing and waiting, interspersed with occasional, very stealthy position changes. They stab at fish below them in the water, making use of their long necks and remarkably long bills, which lends support to the theory that the species' bill is an adaptation for comparatively long-range spear fishing².

The second-year bird photographed here (note the absence of a chestnut belly, and reduced head and neck plumes) was watched at Crooked Tree for over 10 minutes on 27 January 1995 as it fished from this branch c.70 cm above the water surface; during the period it caught two small fish.

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References

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Steve N. G. Howell

Point Reyes Bird Observatory, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, CA 94970, USA.